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THE DRAMA OF THE FROST.

—by—
Monteiro Lobato.

Translated by Joseph Eugene Agan.

June. A frosty morning. The vegetation shrunken. On all the leaves the embroidery of diamonds with which the dew adorns them.

Shivering "colonos" tramp along toward the farm with a curl of smoke about their mouths.

Cold. The cold of frost, the kind that kills the little birds and ices our bones.

We had come out early to see the coffee trees and had come to a halt on the Peak, the highest point on the "fazenda". The major turned toward the sea of coffee rolling before our eyes and exclaimed with a sweeping gesture:

"All my work, look!"

I looked. I looked and understood his pride, feeling proud also of such a countryman. That pioneer was a creative force, one of those that ennoble the human race.

"When I bought this land, it was all virgin forest, every single inch of it. I cleared, I burned, I made roads, levelled knolls, I put up fences, I constructed bridges, I built houses, I provided pastures, I planted coffee—I did everything. I worked like a negro slave for four long years. But I won. The 'fazenda' is perfect, look!"

I looked. I saw a sea of coffee rolling over the breast of the land and standing firm in long, straight files. Not a single defect. It was an army on the eve of a battle but yet untried. It would only go into action the next year. Up to that time the first fruits had been little more than skirmishes of harvests. And the major, the supreme chief of the green army by him cultivated, disciplined, drilled for the decisive battle of the first large harvest which frees the planter from the burdens assumed during the years of preparation, had that look of pride which shines in the face of a father whose sons do not shame their birth.

The Paulista farmer is something worth while in the world. His energy creates. Each plantation is a victory over the stubborn ferocity of the elements united in the defense of aggrieved virginity. The effort of this plant was never sung by poets but there is many an epic that is not so fine as that of these heroes of silent labor. To make a plantation out of nothing is a formidable feat. To alter the order of nature, to conquer her, to impose one's will upon her, to canal her forces in accord with a preconceived plan, to defeat the enraged forest, to discipline the workers, to break the strength of pests—a battle without truce, without end, and without a moment of repose, and what is worse, without the full certainty of victory. He often falls in the clutches of his creditor, the usurer who advanced him a few dear loans

and remained safe in the city with his arms crossed on his mortgage and awaiting the opportune moment to swoop down on his prey like a hawk.

"Really, major, this overcomes me. It is before such spectacles as this that I see the pettiness of those back there who live like parasites on the farmer's labor."

"You are right. I did everything, but the greatest gain is not mine. I have a voracious partner who sucks from me one forth of the production: the government. Then the railroads bleed me, but I do not complain about these for they give me something in return. I will not say the same for the sharks of commerce, that swarm of middlemen that begins in Santos, the drone, and follows in a chain to the American roaster. It makes no difference to me. The coffee supports everyone, even the beastly producer...." he concluded joking.

We spurred the animals to a trot and rode on with our eyes fixed on the intervening coffee trees. Without a defect in formation the parallels of green swept on and on accompanying the roll of the land, until they were confounded in a single mass in the distance. It was a veritable work of art in which man, placing himself above nature, gave it the rythm of symetry.

"Nevertheless," continued the major, "the battle is not won. I contracted debts; the plantation is mortgaged to French Jews. If the harvest I count on does not come, I will be one more man conquered by the fatality of things. Nature, once subjugated, is a mother; but the creditor is always an executioner."

Here and there, lost in the green wave, surviving peroba trees thrust up their twisted trunks as though galvanized by fire in a horrible convulsion of pain. Poor trees! What a sad fate to be themselves deprived of the comrades of their old life and cut off in the creeping green of the coffee, like captive queens dragged at the chariot of the conqueror on his day of triumph. Orphans of the native forest, how you must weep for the comradeship of days gone by. See them. They haven't the grace, the brilliant green tops of those that are born in the open fields. Their branches, fashioned for the close growth of the forest, now seem ridiculous and their height, in such disproportion to their foliage, provokes a laugh. They are like women undressed in public, pale with shame, and not knowing what part of the body to hide. The excessive amount of air stupefies them and the excess of light martyrizes them—accustomed as they are to a small shade and the somnolent shadows of a millinear habitat.

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Inhuman planters—never leave naked trees among coffee. Cut them down, for there is nothing more cruel than to force a tree to be grotesque.

"I left that peroba tree there," said the major, "to indicate the starting point of this section. It is called the peroba of Ludgero, after a valiant Bahian who died under it."

I had a vision of the open book that the district must have been for the planter and said:

"How everything here must be engraved in your memory!"

"Yes, indeed. Everything has a place in my recollections. Each stump, each stone, each turn of the road has a history that I know, tragic at times, like that of the peroba tree, comic at times, but always interesting. There! Do you see that Jerivá stump? It was during a February storm. I had taken refuge in a sapé-covered hut and there in silence, we awaited, I and the shift of men, the end of the diluvium when a streak of lightning broke almost over our heads.

"The end of the world, boss!" I recall Zé Coivara crying in terror. So it seemed! But it was only the end of an old coqueiro of which there remains to-day—sic transit... this poor stump. When the rain was over we found it split into pieces."

Further on we came upon a huge red pit in the earth. The Major pointed to it saying:

"The scene of the first crime committed on the plantation. A skirt affair, everyone knows. In the cities and in the interior the two causes of crime are rum and skirts. Two Cearenses cut each other up here. One of them ended his earthly course here: the other is doing time in a penitentiary. And the skirt, very well satisfied with life, lives with the 'tertius'. The same old story!"

Thus, from story to story called up to memory by landmarks along the road, we came to the house where a lunch was awaiting us. We lunched and I don't know

whether it was from the sharp appetite whetted by the morning walk or because of the cook's exceptional merit but the lunch of that day has been engraved on my memory forever. I am not a poet, but if Appolo should some day give me a Padre Vieira clap on the head, I swear that rather than sing the praise of Lauras and Natercias, I would compose a beautiful ode on that inimitable luncheon, the only gustatory regret that will descend to the grave with me. Afterwards, while the Major attended to his mail, I went out to take a look about the place and meeting the overseer fell into a conversation with him. From him I learned of the mortgage that burdened the plantation and of the possibility of another coming to reap the fruit of the Major's labor.

"But this," the man explained, "would only happen in case of real bad luck—a hail storm or a frost, like those that come no more."

"Why do you say that they come no more?"

"Because the last great frost was in '95. From that time on things have been better. The world, with age, changes, like people. The frosts, for example, are coming to an end. Formerly no one planted coffee where we plant it to-day. Only half a hill above. But this is no longer the case. Did you see the plantation in the valley? The land is very low but if frost comes there it does no harm, a slight toast at the most. The boss with one or two harvests will be able to pay off his debt and become the most prominent planter in the country."

"I hope so for he deserves to be."

I left him. I took a turn about, went to the orchard, passed the sty where little pigs were playing and then returned to the house. A negro was giving the shutters a last coat of paint. Why are they always painted green, I asked. The black replied smiling:

"Because shutters are green just as the sky is blue. It's their nature...."

Diga que viu no "Brazam"—Diga a todos.



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I accepted the theory and entered the house.

At the table the topic of conversation was the frost.

"This is the dangerous month," the Major said. "The month of affliction. No matter how firm a man may be, he trembles at this time. The frosts are an everlasting nightmare. Fortunately the frosts are no longer what they were. They now permit us to use great stretches of low land where the old planters would not dream of putting a single tree. But inspite of this, one who takes the risk, is always worrying. Will they come? Will they not come? God only knows!"

His glance flitted through the window and seemed to sound the limpid sky.

"To-day, for example, is one of many possibilities. This fine cold, this heavy air—"

He meditated for a few moments. Then he put to flight the clouds on his mind and murmured:

"It isn't worth while to think about this. What must happen is written there in the book of destiny."

"Forget the air," I objected.

"Christ knew nothing about farming," he replied smiling.

And the frost came. Not the light frost that comes every year, but a calamitous frost, a cyclical frost, born in waves from Argentina.

The ghostly afternoon sun gave light without luminosity, and rays without any heat. A boreal, frigid sun. And the night fell suddenly without warning. I went to bed early, my teeth chattering and in spite of two extra covers I lay shivering a full hour before falling asleep. The plantation bell woke me at daybreak and feeling half frozen I rose and went thru some violent exercises, the only remedy in such cases. I went out into the yard. The night dew bit deep into my flesh. But

what a marvelous spectacle! A snowy whiteness everywhere. The ground, trees, and fields were covered with a white blanket. The trees, motionless, frozen, seemed immersed in a lime bath. A thin coating of ice on the ground. Water turned to glass. The clothes hanging on the line were rigid as tho stiffened by a strong starch. Everything seemed powdered with a fine white essence that had spread as though from a sack. What a marvelous tableau! Invariable as our scenery is with its tones that endure year in and year out, I was thrilled by seeing it suddenly change and adorned with a splendid bridal veil—the bride of death, ah!

For some time I tramped along at random, overcome by the splendor of the scene. The marvelous dream picture would soon die erased from the canvas by the golden sponge of the sun. Already thru the tops of the trees sifted the rays struggling to restore the green of yesterday. Little by little green patches began to appear amid the frost and the white coating thinned, revealing the heavy undertone of submersed green.

Only in the lowlands and under the trees, did the whiteness still persist contrasting its chill trimness with the warm resurrecting tones. Life would win, guided by the sun. But the intervention of the fiery Phoebus, if too hasty, would make a terrible disaster of the frost that year—the most terrible of all that have left their mark on São Paulo's embaúbeiras. The resurrection of the green was apparent. The vegetation was dead. Days later, the surface of the ground would be an immense drugget, where the sepia would exhibit the entire dry tones. It would be broken only, here and there, by the soiled green of the eucalyptus, the invincible black-green of the orange trees, and the emerald of the shameless vassourinha.

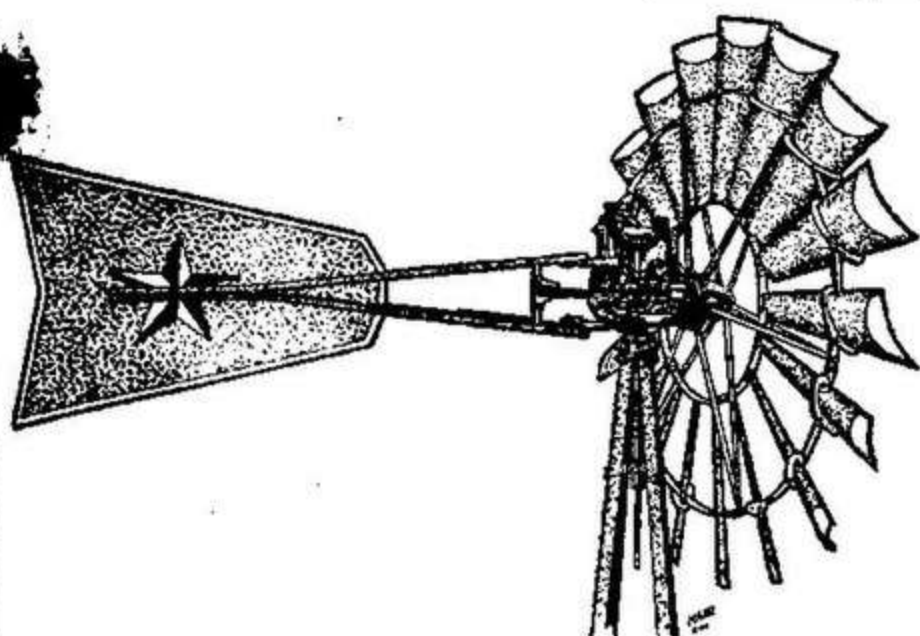
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When I returned the sun was quite high. The house was upset with the terror of great catastrophes. It was only then that I realized that the beautiful spectacle which up to that moment I had regarded thru an esthetic prism, had a tragic meaning—the ruin of the heroic enter. I sought him anxiously. He had disappeared. His wife told me that he had passed a sleepless night and at the first light of day had ran to the window. There he remained motionless watching the sky. Then he went out without asking for coffee, as was his custom. He had probably gone to look at the trees.

That must have been the case. But how he delayed his return. Eleven o'clock, and he was not back. The family began to feel apprehensions. Noon. One o'clock. Two. Three. He did not come back. The overseer, who had gone out to look for him, returned in the afternoon but without any news.

I searched everywhere and didn't find a trace. I am afraid that something has happened. I am going to send the men out to look in every direction.

Dona Anna, overcome with terror, repeated a single phrase:

"What will happen to us, Holy God! Quincas is likely to commit any wild act!"

I went out to look also in company with the overseer. We followed every road and explored every cavern but all in vain. The afternoon passed. Night fell—the most lugubrious night in my life—a night of disaster and affliction. I didn't sleep. It was impossible to sleep in that atmosphere of sorrow and weeping. Once the dogs began to bark in the yard but silenced immediately. The morning broke, icy like that of the day before. Everything was snow white again. The sun came. It repeated the change of scenery. The whiteness faded and the toasted green vegetation covered the landscape with a heavy shroud. In the house the same disorder of the previous day was repeated, the same senseless speculations...

In the afternoon, however, at three o'clock, a "camarada" ran up to the house and cried while still quite distant:

"I found him! He's near the pit!"

"Alive?" the overseer asked.

"Alive, yes, but—"

Dona Anna heard the good news in the doorway and exclaimed amid sobs and cries of joy:

"Praise be to God!"

A few moments later we all set out for the pit and about a hundred paces from it we saw among the burned coffee trees the shape of a man. We approached. It was the Major. But in what a condition! His clothes were in shreds, his hair disheveled and heavy with mud, his eyes glassy and wide staring, and his hands were a can of paint and a brush. He did not notice our approach. He did not stop work. He continued—he continued to paint, one by one, with the bright emerald green of the shutters, the burned leaves of a dead coffee tree.

Dona Anna, astonished, became mute with terror. Then comprehending the tragedy, she broke into a convulsive sob:

"Mad.....mad, my God!"



Say you saw it in the "Brazilian".—Tell everybody